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Honduras Vote On Feb 16 Is Limited

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TEGUCIGALPA — Democracy, which took a giant step backward in Honduras when the military changed the rules of the game in 1963, has taken a baby step forward. Former President Ramon Villeda Morales has been permitted to return from his Costa Rican exile.

THE LEGAL name of Villeda's country is the Republic of Honduras. But, more often than not since it became independent of Spain in 1821, the Central American nation has been run by military officers rather than by a president.

Villeda was about to end his term as constitutional chief executive when the Armed Forces prematurely ended it for him on Oct 3, 1963, just 10 days before elections were to be held for his successor.

VOTERS AT that time were making up their minds for which of two civilians to vote. Air force Col Osvaldo Lopez Arellano, head of the armed forces, relieved them of the problem. By means of a rather sloppy coup d'etat that broke the principal rule of Latin military takeovers — "Thou shalt not kill unless thou canst not otherwise grab the marbles" — the colonel elected himself.

Several persons died in fighting that might have been avoided with a little careful coupmanship. And since then, Lopez has been chief-of-state.

IN ONE RESPECT, the military did follow the rules of Latin American revolution. It announced that it was taking power to save the country from Communism.

But in this particular case, the United States couldn't quite buy the theory. It realized that it was pretty much a question of the outs — the National Party — having little hope of getting in by the electoral route and of the ins, the Liberal Party, threatening to clip the wings of the highly-

privileged Army if its mandate were renewed. So the outs and the military got together and voted the ins out of office with their rifles.

WASHINGTON proclaimed that democracy was the real loser and refused, for a couple of months, to recognize the new government. When it finally granted recognition, it did so only after getting Lopez & Co. to promise they would be good boys and move, before too long, toward a return to constitutionality. That is, to start heading back to where the country was before they "saved" it.

Now, the promissory notes are falling due. On Tuesday, Feb 16, elections will be held for a Constituent Assembly, whose job it will be to draw a new blueprint for government.

AN AMNESTY has been granted permitting most of those sent into exile in 1963 to go back — but not in time to be eligible to run for that Assembly or even to vote. To be eligible, one had to be in the country at the end of last November. Neither Modesto Rodas Alvarado, the Liberal Party's presidential candidate in 1963, nor Villeda are thus enfranchised.

Anyway, Rodas Alvarado already had returned to Tegucigalpa and Villeda Morales was preparing to go as I talked to him here.

VILLEDA says his party's plan is, first, to win the Assembly election. (It can win, he says. If it doesn't, he said, it will be robbery. He may be right.)

SECOND, the Assembly would name a three-man provisional government: One man from the Liberal Party, one from the National Party, and one "neutral." He admits it might be hard to find a political neutral in Honduras but: "Maybe we can get the archbishop, or at least somebody who will act neutral."

THIRD, a year later, a presidential election would be held. The former president would not give a "yes" or "no" answer as to whether he would be his party's candidate at such time.

The National Party's plan, according to Villeda, is much simpler:

If it wins the Assembly, it will name Lopez constitutional president. No fuss, no bother, no transition, no waste of time. Just a change in the colonel's title.

Villeda had a few comments to make about the United States:

"I'M VERY FOND of the U.S. but some official organ of the United States must have given at least tacit approval to my overthrow." (He apparently wasn't talking about the State Department, but he wouldn't specify whether he meant the CIA, the Pentagon or another group.)

"The Honduran Army would not have dared do it otherwise." (Honduras is one of those countries where a simple warning from the U.S. am-



VILLEDA MORALES
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